

# Medicaid Back to Covering Feet

*Sunday, September  
1, 2002*

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THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE**

The state Department of Health has announced it will soon restore a portion of the podiatry services that were recently cut out of Medicaid, the health program for the needy.

The news came Wednesday during a public hearing on 2004 budget considerations. Residents and advocates for the needy in attendance called the restoration of some podiatry services "a bright spot" in an otherwise dim budget picture for the entire department, which absorbed major cuts during the 2002 Legislature earlier this year.

The Department of Health is expected to submit its final 2004 budget proposal to the governor's office by Sept. 30 in anticipation of the next session, spokesman Steve McDonald said. All podiatry coverage for adult Medicaid beneficiaries was eliminated in July due to existing cuts.

But after patients and caregivers told Department of Health workers they could save money in the long run by restoring about one-fourth of critical podiatry services, the agency decided to do so, McDonald said. Such services prevent more costly medical conditions and the need for expensive surgeries. re earlier this year.

The services, which will be restored Oct. 1, "involve cleaning and dressing foot sores and removing toe nails that are infected, usually fungal," he said. "All this benefit really deals with is chronic circulatory problems of the foot, such as diabetic ulcers and sores."

Earlier this year Medicaid, at the bequest of lawmakers and the department's own budget makers, also instituted cuts to adult dental care and speech and audiology services. The cutbacks affected about 32,000 Utahns; they also convinced the state's Division of Health Care Financing director, Michael Deily, to write legislative analysts asking for future funds to restore those services.

Analyst Spencer Pratt, who attended Wednesday's hearing but was not scheduled to speak, sounded a cautious note when asked about the possibility of increasing the Department of Health budget in the 2003 Legislature.

"Don't hold your breath," Pratt said.

Sheila Walsh McDonald, a health care advocate with the nonprofit Salt Lake Community Action Program, praised the restored podiatry services in her comments before the hearing. But she vowed to push for all services to be restored to Medicaid and to Utah's Children's Health Insurance Program, which has reduced key dental services since last session's budget cutting.

More public hearings on the 2004 budget will be held in the coming months after the governor's office receives the Department of Health budget requests and starts to prepare its own. By January, the legislative subcommittees that vote on the budget will have gotten several versions -- then scheduled hearings with

residents and department officers to decide how to proceed in January.